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2013

“Dragging Wyatt Earp”

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IUPUI ScholarWorks

This is the author’s manuscript: This chapter was published as Rebein, Robert. “Dragging Wyatt Earp.” *Dragging Wyatt Earp: A Personal History of Dodge City*, Swallow Press, 2013, p. 76-89. The book can be found at the publisher’s website <http://www.ohioswallow.com/book/Dragging+Wyatt+Earp>.

Dragging Wyatt Earp

By Robert Rebein

Hear the words Dodge City, Kansas these days and you're apt to think, depending on your age, either of a moribund 1970s TV series—the wildly fictitious *GunsSmoke*, featuring Miss Kitty, Festus, and Marshal Matt Dillon—or else of a favorite phrase of screen hacks and gleeful, road-tripping frat boys: *Let's get the hell out of Dodge!* Few are the souls who would hear the town's name and think of the *real* Dodge City, self-proclaimed “Cowboy Capital of the World,” with its beef packing plants and used car lots and the tired tones of boosterism (“Come Grow with Us!”) emanating from its chamber of commerce. To know that Dodge, you'd have to have crossed southwest Kansas in a car, an experience road-weary travelers have been known to compare to crossing the ocean by sail. Either that or, like me, you'd have to be from there.

It's been twenty years now since I escaped the place, and in that time, the real Dodge City, with its dry riverbed and red brick streets, grain elevators casting shadows across an empty downtown, the air filled with dust or tinged with a fecal tang blown in from the feedlots, the Dodge of the Red Demons and the Conqs (short for Conquistadors) and the now-defunct St. Mary of the Plains Cavaliers, of the dying mall called Village Square, the scarred but still functional South Drive-In, the cheesy tourist traps (Boot Hill and Front Street, Home of Stone, Kansas Teachers' Hall of Fame), none of them worth the drive and not meant to be, the Dodge of

the diseased Dutch elm and incessant, driving wind, with its country club and tacquerias, its chiropractic clinics and failing farm implement dealerships, and its Gene's Heartland Foods that used to be a Safeway that used to be the hospital where I was born . . . *that* Dodge City almost ceased to exist for me, having been replaced in my mind by the Dodge of legend and myth, the so-called Queen of the Cowtowns, the Wickedest Little City in America, the Bibulous Babylon of the Frontier.

Almost, but not quite.

For while I confess to a weakness for tales of the Old West, particularly those having to do with my hometown's sordid past, in most important respects—in memory, imagination, all the infinitesimal allegiances of identity—I remain tied to that other Dodge, *my* Dodge, the one that raised me up and forgave my feeble sins and never once asked for a single thing in return except that I leave and find my future elsewhere.

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For a teenager suffering the boredom of the Cowboy Capital circa 1980, the only thing to do at night, so we all said, was to “drag Wyatt Earp.” By this we did not mean, as the image would suggest, that we'd pull the nineteenth-century lawman through the streets by his boot heels, but only that we'd cruise up and down Wyatt Earp Boulevard in our beat-up Chevrolets and hand-me-down Buicks, searching for that elusive bit of excitement that always seemed to exist just outside of our reach. Wyatt Earp, to us, was not a person but a *place*, a mile-long ribbon of asphalt that stretched from Boot Hill on the east to the Dodge House on the west, containing in that brief space all of our teeming and awkward adolescence, our collective longings and flirtations and our often ridiculous mistakes, few of which we had to pay for in any meaningful way.

Dragging Wyatt Earp was a ritual and a clearly demarcated rite of passage, one that began at fourteen or fifteen, the years when most of us were issued our first driver's licenses, and that ended two or three years later, when the pool halls and beer joints and lakeside keg parties began to absorb us. Had we been city kids, we'd have been hanging out at the mall or the cineplex. But we weren't city kids, and Dodge was a suburb of nowhere, hundreds of mostly tedious miles from Dallas, Denver or Kansas City, and there was much that we would never do or see before the age of nineteen or twenty. But we could drink and drive, both at early ages and in plain sight of the police. A kind of unwritten law had been established long ago.

I can recall, at sixteen or seventeen, wheeling into the Kwik Shop at Twelfth and Wyatt Earp and emerging five minutes later with a six-pack of Coors cradled in one arm like a football. Often the person selling me the beer knew exactly who I was, who my father and brothers were, what position I played on the high school basketball team. Sometimes there'd be a cop car in the parking lot when I came out, two sheriff's deputies sitting side by side with their elbows jutting out open windows. I'd nod to them as I ambled past with my illicit cargo, and they'd nod right back in that slow, calculated manner of police everywhere.

"You be careful now, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," I'd answer, innocent as you please.

Once on Earp, the routine rarely varied. The official speed limit was thirty-five miles an hour, but like the drinking age, we regarded this as more of a suggestion than an actual law. Either you went fifteen or you went fifty, depending on your style and purpose, the level of gas in your tank, the amount of beer or Jack Daniels or peppermint schnapps you'd consumed. Racing from one light to the next was not unheard of, but neither was it a regular occurrence. A pecking order had been established long before, in seventh or eighth grade, so what was the

point? Dragging Wyatt Earp was about killing time; it was about hanging out and hooking up, growing up and throwing up (indeed, in the teen vernacular of Dodge City circa 1980, to “erp” was to vomit, usually by hanging one’s head out the door of a moving car); it was about chasing dreams and bursting at the seams and endlessly rehearsing for that pre-ordained day when we, too, would get the hell out of Dodge, never to return.

*

Dodge City in 1876 was a quintessential Western boom town, a nexus for cash and cattle where overlords like the legendary Shanghai Pierce sold their massive herds at a profit and immediately paid off their hired underlings, most of them young Texans away from home for the first time. To say that the merchants of Dodge City saw these greenhorns coming would be an understatement of epic proportions. In a piece published in the Dodge City *Times* in the spring of 1878, editor Nicholas Klaine made no bones about the anticipation with which “this delectable city of the plains” awaited the return of the cattle trade with its “countless herds” and “hordes of bipeds.” As many as 1,500 of these “bipeds” might hit town in a single season, and as Klaine, licking his chops, pointed out, Dodge City was the single “source from which the great army of the herder and driver is fed”:

This ‘cattle village’ and far-famed ‘wicked city’ is decked in gorgeous attire in preparation for the long horn. Like the sweet harbinger of spring, the boot black came, he of white and he of black. Next the barber ‘with his lather and shave.’ Too, with all that go to make up the busy throng of life’s faithful fever, come the Mary Magdalenes, ‘selling their souls to whoever’ll buy.’ There is ‘high, low,

jack, and game,' all adding to the great expectation so important an event brings about.

If there was a problem in all this, a glitch, so to speak, in an otherwise flawless business plan, it was the town's tendency to erupt in periodic bouts of profit-draining violence. Ordinances against public intoxication and the carrying of firearms in the city limits were duly composed and promulgated, but enforcing them was another matter. That required the deft touch of a man like Wyatt Earp, who had honed his skills as a peace officer in the cowtowns of Ellsworth and Wichita and was more than ready to employ them in Dodge, too—provided, of course, the price was right.

*

The epicenter of my teen years was the parking lot below Boot Hill Museum, a rectangle of concrete the size of a football field that on any given night contained the same tribes and anthropologically interesting sub-groups as the high school—jocks, cheerleaders, potheads, Future Farmers of America—the only difference being that here one leaned against the polished hood of one's car, instead of against one's locker. The same atmosphere of boredom, of stoically doing one's time, obtained in both places. If someone had asked our parents why they allowed us to openly drink alcohol in a parking lot in the middle of town, they probably would have said, "At least we know where they are. At least they're *safe*." And yet what irony, that this, the place we gathered most nights to gossip, pose, and drink beer, bore a name synonymous the world over with sin and violent death. The phrases "dead line," "red light district," and "die with your boots on" all originated here, as did the legends of Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday and Big Nose Kate Elder, Mysterious Dave Mather and Squirrel Tooth Alice.

Did we know? Did we care? But what's the use of asking: we were teenagers, after all. It would have taken something considerably more than mere history to impress us. In the middle of the parking lot was a large cage, perhaps ten feet square, made of two-by-fours and chicken wire. Sometime before, so the story went, the parking lot had become so littered with our crushed beer cans that someone's dad or Eagle Scout older brother had been inspired to build the cage to hold the empties. I couldn't say now if the story is true, but we certainly were proud of it at the time, and most weekends we possessed no higher ambition than to "fill the cage."

This was the kind of thing that mattered to us, not Wyatt Earp, not history.

Boot Hill parking lot was the place I took my first real girlfriend on our first real date. She was a cheerleader with ambitions to be crowned homecoming queen, and I was a jock suffering from the usual jock grandiosity. I can still recall what it felt like to make that slow, head-turning crawl through the cars parked at Boot Hill. You weren't an official couple until you'd run that gauntlet. Later, when the relationship began to crumble under the weight of its own importance, Boot Hill parking lot was also the place I'd go late at night to cheat on this girlfriend (try to, at any rate), so secure was I in the knowledge that no one who saw me there would dare tell the secret. Like the French Quarter of New Orleans, Boot Hill possessed a strange, nearly magical ability to transform itself several times daily, from afternoon tourist haven to evening esplanade to late-night cruising ground; if the vibe reigning at any one time didn't suit, you could always come back later, and, like the weather on the high plains, it would be sure to have changed.

That world! Looking back, I don't see a series of clearly demarcated nights, but rather a blur, a collage. I see the pimpled faces of my friends, our bad haircuts and unfashionable clothes. I hear the over-amped music, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC, Kool and the Gang, Bob Seeger. I smell the

burned oil and rubber and gasoline and weed, recall the sickly sweet taste of Copenhagen and Skoal, Jack Daniels sipped from a wax cup, the sloppy kisses copped in cramped back seats, and the feel of tight jeans and no hat even in the winter and the stiff arms of my new letter jacket. I remember the roadside signs, McDonalds, Burger King, Pizza Hut, but also El Charro, Kirby's Western Store, OK Tire, Muddy Waters, El Matador. I remember the cars, especially the newer, faster ones with their space-age names (RX-7, 280Z) and the lovingly restored older models ('57 Chevy, '64 Mustang, '69 GTO). My own pride and joy was a dark green 1970 Firebird Formula 400, a huge, hulking beast with a chrome-studded engine, fat tires with raised white letters, and a six-speaker stereo system that cost more than the car itself.

Most of all, though, I remember the talk, the ceaseless posturing and bragging and trying on of ideas, the feeble put-downs and bad jokes and misty-eyed confessions, the sputtering declarations of love. Like teenagers everywhere, we existed in a bizarre, fog-bound realm in which the present was at once insufferable and all-important. The past did not exist at all, and when the subject of the future flared up, as it did periodically, we were quick to smother it in a series of outlandish predictions. We would win Daytona, take Hollywood by storm, run for the U.S. Senate, earn our first million by the age of thirty, and so on. No plans for how we would accomplish these things were ever asked for, and none were given. Unlike our peers in the cities and the suburbs, we didn't sweat the details. We just believed.

What is it about growing up in a small town in the West that breeds such bravado, such innocence and blind faith? Was it our isolation? The vaunted self-reliance of the region? The fact that our parents and teachers praised us inordinately, or that acceptance into any of the state's colleges was a *fait accompli*? Maybe, but I have another explanation: we were leaving. And not just for a year or five years, but forever. Like the region's cattle, wheat, and corn, we'd been

raised for export, and most of us had learned this fact at about the same time we learned that Santa Claus was a fiction. Coming into this knowledge was both terrifying and liberating. It was like looking over the edge of a great abyss, or knowing in advance the date of your own death. It steeled us and set us apart. And yet, for all that, there was no need for alarm or haste or even preparation. As far as we were concerned, the day of our departure would come of its own accord, just as morning would come, after a long night of dragging Wyatt Earp.

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Other frontier lawmen might have been faster on the draw, better liars, more handsome and flamboyant—Wild Bill Hickok comes to mind in all of these categories—but none was better at handling drunks than Wyatt S. Earp.

According to newspaper articles on file at the Kansas Heritage Center, Wyatt Berry Stapp Earp was a deputy city marshal in Dodge City—a policeman, essentially—from May 1876 to October 1879, the height of the city’s cow town fame, during which time he earned a reputation as “one of the most efficient officers Dodge ever had,” a cop with “a quiet way of taking the most desperate characters into custody.”

What was this “quiet method” of Marshal Earp’s? An item from the August 20, 1878, Ford County *Globe* sheds some light on the matter. “Another shooting affair occurred on the ‘south side’ Saturday night,” the article begins.

It appears that one of the cow boys, becoming intoxicated and quarrelsome, undertook to take possession of the bar in the Comique. To this the bar keeper objected and a row ensued. Our policemen interfered and had some difficulty in

handling their man. Several cattle men then engaged in the broil and in the excitement some of them were bruised on the head with six shooters.

Plainly put, during his stint with the Dodge City police, Wyatt Earp became known not for shooting his gun—a Colt’s 45 specially modified with an extended barrel almost a foot long (the infamous “Buntline Special”)—but rather for using it to brain belligerent drunks. “If some obstreperous cowboy resisted arrest,” Earp told his biographer, the fawning Stuart Lake, “a marshal could jerk his gun, bat him over the head, and end the argument.” Earp had various names for this favorite ploy of his: “manhandling,” “buffaloing,” “bending a six-gun over a man’s head.” We moderns employ another term—excessive force—but in Earp’s day it was thought that a cop who kept order without actually firing his gun was a very good cop indeed.

So much of what we think we know about Wyatt Earp turns out, on closer examination, to be false or misleading. Having studied the famous photographs, all of them in black-and-white, we naturally imagine a dark man, when by all reports Earp was a strawberry blonde with blue eyes. Having seen the movies and TV shows, we imagine a big man, someone of the stature of John Wayne or, better yet, James Arness of *Gunsmoke* fame, when in truth Earp was rather slight, never weighing more than 160 pounds. Having read the pulps, we picture a classic gunslinger, a man standing alone at high noon, but as a cowtown cop, Earp worked almost exclusively at night and in tandem with other police, who remembered him not as a “quick draw” or “crack shot” but as an accomplished brawler, a bare-knuckles fighter of such skill and tenacity that fellow cop Bat Masterson, later a New York sports writer, was reminded of none other than the legendary Jim Corbett. “I doubt if there was a man in the West who could whip [Wyatt] in a rough-and-tumble fight,” Masterson wrote.

As for the self-doubt and scruples Hollywood so prefers in its cinematic marshals, apparently Wyatt Earp wasn't much troubled by these. The testimony of those who knew him best describes a dour, supremely confident man who inspired fear in his enemies and loyalty in his friends. Earp was calm, experienced, and methodical, and perhaps most importantly of all, he did not drink. No, not a drop. Add to this the fact, as one biographer has it, that the young Earp "grew up in the same pro-union, Republican, progressive, antislavery atmosphere that spawned Abraham Lincoln," and the portrait is complete. The man Dodge City's saloon owners hired to keep the peace in the Wicked City was neither a hero nor a saint but rather a detached, seasoned, and somewhat sadistic teetotaler who was good with his fists and didn't much care for the Rebel scum he was charged with arresting on a nightly basis.

For his work in Dodge, Earp drew a salary of \$100 a month, plus a \$2 bonus for every arrest made. According to Stuart Lake, one of Earp's innovations as a Dodge City marshal was to pool these bonuses and share them among all the cops on the force—provided the arrests were made without shots being fired. "I figured that if the cowboys were manhandled and heaved into the caboose every time they showed in town with guns on, or cut loose in forbidden territory, they'd come to time quicker than if we kept them primed for gunplay," Earp recalled.

Earp's idea—to kill no one, but to collect plenty of bounties from buffaloed drunks—worked like a charm from first to last. "We winged a few tough customers who insisted on shooting, but none of the victims died," he recalled. "On the other hand, we split seven or eight hundred dollars in bounties each month. That meant some three hundred arrests every thirty days, and as practically every prisoner heaved into the caboose was thoroughly buffaloed in the process, we made quite a dent in the cowboy conceit."

Dent indeed! Earp's calculation here is as chilling as his methods were brutal, and yet, a century later, it's still difficult to argue with his basic premise, which counted a rap on the skull as a lesser evil than a bullet in the brain.

Admired by those whose pockets he helped fill, hated by those whose skulls he bruised, Wyatt Earp was the greatest bouncer the West ever knew.

*

Of all the nights I spent cruising the strip that bears Earp's name, only one stands apart from all the rest. It was a hot night the summer before my junior year of high school, and a friend and I had spent it at the South Drive-In, reclining in beach chairs and sipping at a twelve-pack of smuggled-in Coors. I don't remember what movie played that night, or if it was any good. I don't even recall how many beers I consumed, or in what span of time I consumed them. All I really remember is that, in comparison to other nights that came both before and after this one, I wasn't particularly drunk. Certainly I had no business behind the wheel of a car, but that, like so many others, was a lesson I had yet to learn.

The movie over, we tossed the beach chairs into the back of the Firebird and bounced out of the lunar landscape of the theater. "Wanna drag Earp a few times?" I asked.

"Yeah, why not," answered my friend, who in years to come would earn a degree in nuclear engineering and circumnavigate the globe in a Cold War sub.

We crossed the dry Arkansas at Second Avenue, not far from where the Spanish conquistador Coronado crossed more than four hundred years before, merging quickly into the night traffic on West Wyatt Earp. What were we thinking? Where were we going? It's all lost now, like the motivations of the men and women who stare back at us, bug-eyed, from nineteenth century daguerreotypes. Approaching Boot Hill, we craned our heads to the right,

cataloguing in an instant all of the cars parked there. Vaguely, as though attempting to see through a fog, I recall a disturbance in my rear-view mirror, something only partially blocked by the beach chairs piled haphazardly in the back seat. What was it? A flash of headlights? The streetlight behind us turning from yellow to red? Whatever it was, I veered sharply into the right-hand lane, sideswiping a carload of Utah tourists. The Firebird shot forward, jumped a curb, and narrowly missed a phone pole before coming to rest next to a chain-link fence.

“What the hell!” my friend howled. The paper cup he’d been using as a spittoon had overturned in his lap, filling the car with a sharp, wintergreen smell.

“You all right?” I asked, blinking at the red lights aglow in the car’s dash.

“Well, I guess,” my friend said.

Moments later, a city patrolman who’d witnessed the entire episode rolled to a stop behind us, lights silently flashing.

What happened next could only have happened in that time and place, or so I’ve come to believe. With the whole of Boot Hill parking lot looking on, my friend and I were pulled from the Firebird and deposited in the back of the patrolman’s copper-and-cream squad car, there to sweat the minutes while he calmed the tourists and sent them on their way. Afterward, the patrolman, whose name I’ve forgotten, took up an aggressive position, legs spread wide, behind the Firebird’s license plate, and began writing tickets.

“Can you walk heel to toe?” my friend asked, attempting a joke. “Can you recite the alphabet backwards?”

Scared, my throat dry from the Copenhagen I’d swallowed in the crash, I said nothing at all in response, but only sat there watching as the patrolman closed his aluminum ticket box and began a bow-legged amble back to where we waited.

“Get out,” he ordered, opening my door.

I scrambled from the back seat of the squad car, my friend following, and together we lined up in the glare of the car’s head lights. By now there were twenty or more people looking on, most of them across the road from us and unable to hear what was said.

“Think you can drive that heap of yours?” the patrolman asked, handing me the stack of tickets he’d written.

I nodded, still too scared to say a word.

“All right, then,” he said, shaking his head. “Straight home, fellas. No detours. You hear?”

“Yes, sir,” I managed to say.

As we sped away from there, my friend performed a quick inventory of the tickets.

“Reckless driving, failure to signal . . . What is this, your lucky day?”

“I guess so,” I said.

Before work the following Monday, I walked into the county courthouse and paid the tickets in full, using money I’d been saving for college. The total damage was something on the order of \$400, but I paid it gladly.

Two years later, I packed my bags and headed east on Highway 56, reversing the outbound path of the old Santa Fe Trail. I can still hear the throaty roar of the Firebird as I opened all four barrels of the carburetor. Trust me when I tell you that I worshiped every inch of that ridiculous beast, and yet, six months later, with little forethought and no real regrets, I walked onto a used car lot in North Lawrence, Kansas, and traded straight across for a boxy, puke-green 1975 Volvo. So do we shed our adolescent selves and venture forth into a larger, less forgiving world.

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Wyatt Earp left Dodge City for Tombstone, Arizona, in September 1879. In Earp's words, "Dodge's edge was getting dull." In 1885, the wood shanties of Front Street, the model for a thousand Hollywood sets, burned to the ground in a series of freakish fires. The following winter delivered a devastating storm, the great blizzard of 1886, which decimated herds across the West, bankrupted most of the big ranches, and brought the so-called Cattle Kingdom to its knees. But even before the arrival of fire and ice, the writing was already on the wall. "There are silent but irresistible forces at work to regenerate Dodge City," the Topeka *Capital* reported in 1885. "The passage of the Texas cattle bill, the defeat of the trail bill and the rapid settlement of the country south and southwest of Dodge, have destroyed the place as a cattle town. The cowboy must go, and with him will go the gamblers, the courtesans, the desperadoes and the saloons."

With the good-time people gone away, sod busters, precursors of my own humble ancestors, moved in and broke up the prairie into massive, monotonous wheat farms. With them came the temperance unions that had already tamed the eastern half of the state. And so the town turned its back on its sordid past and accepted a sober if somewhat boring future. When Front Street was rebuilt after the fires of 1885, the work was done in brick—a safer, more permanent choice than wood. Fifteen years later, on the cusp of a new century, the place had changed so much that the editors of the *Globe-Republican* proudly declared the birth of a "New Dodge City," no longer a place of "high carnival," where "rapturous lewdness and bawdiness held sway," but rather a city "clothed in her right mind," "a paragon of virtue, sobriety and industry."

There's an undeniable sadness to all this that resonates even today—the circus gone, the party over, the days of debauched glory all in the past. Innocence gives way to experience, the

child grows to adulthood, the young colt goes into harness and is made to pull the wagon of duty. Inevitably, a kind of nostalgia sets in. When word spread that Warner Brothers was planning a movie based on the city's lurid past, a delegation of old timers and Chamber of Commerce types traveled to Hollywood to invite Jack Warner to stage the film's premiere in Dodge. Photographs of this 1939 event look surreal, with fifty thousand fans crowding the tracks of the Santa Fe depot to await the arrival of Errol Flynn, Jean Parker, and Humphrey Bogart. Twenty years later, in 1958, a replica of the original Front Street was built on a slope below Boot Hill, and the road running below it, formerly Chestnut Street, was renamed Wyatt Earp Boulevard. In 1970, brick Front Street fell to the wrecking ball to make room for more off-street parking and the widening of Wyatt Earp to accommodate the likes of McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Thus did Front Street, upon which, as Zane Grey famously wrote, more frontier history was enacted than anywhere else in the West, become a fast-food corridor and the latest outpost of Auto Zone and Applebee's.

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Last summer, I returned to Dodge City on the occasion of my parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, rolling into town from the east behind the wheel of a loaded-to-the-gills SUV in the back seat of which my son and daughter watched *Shrek 2* on their portable flat-screen TV. Driving up Wyatt Earp to Fourteenth Street, I was amused to see that the Kwik Shop where I once bought beer was now Doc Holliday Liquors. Across the street, on the site of an old Sinclair station, stood Wyatt Earp Liquors. Since the beef packing plants moved in twenty years ago, the town has become more Western and Hispanic, the airwaves full of country music, programming in Spanish, advertisements for the annual Dodge City Days Roundup Rodeo. This, too, is my Dodge City, although I do not yet know it half as well as I would like to.

In the years since I got the hell out of Dodge, I've lived in three different states and two foreign countries. I've married, fathered children and a career, seen a handful of dreams come true, while others have died on the vine, despite all my efforts to keep them alive. To return home after years away is at best a bittersweet thing. It is to encounter ghosts at every stoplight and corner—ghosts of what once was, as well as ghosts of what might have been.

As I turned north on Fourteenth Street, just as I had as a kid heading home after a long night of dragging Wyatt Earp, I was reminded of what that policeman told my friend and me all those years ago.

“Straight home, fellas. No detours.”

But it's all detours after a while.